University Transit Pass Program
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee UPASS

Summary:
In Fall 1994, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), along with the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS), implemented an innovative transit pass program, the UPASS, which provides UWM students with unlimited use of the County transit system. Students who are registered for at least one credit at the university and pay segregated fees receive the UPASS.

Results of the program were highly favorable. The percentage of trips by transit increased from about 12% of the trips to over 25% while at the same time auto usage dropped from 54% to about 40%. Usage of the pass for work and shop trips showed a similar increase. Various market segments such as those who lived near a transit route serving the university showed over a 50% market share of trips. The pass led to reduced auto travel, lessened parking demand and to considerable cost savings for both transit users and non-users. Other impacts included a positive impact on enrollments and some impact on housing choice and job availability.

Description:
The UPASS program provides students with unlimited travel on any MCTS transit route at anytime, anywhere, for any trip purpose with no additional fare. All students can receive a pass with no limitations. Transit service to UWM was also expanded during the first semester of the program with the addition of two express transit routes. The pass is paid for by a segregated fee assessed to all students as part of their tuition.

Enrollment at UWM over recent years has ranged between 20,000 to 24,000 students. Approximately 2,100 students live in the on-campus dormitories while a large percentage of the student population live in the surrounding neighborhood. The campus has very limited parking capacity with only about 2000 spaces available for faculty, staff, students and visitors. A high percentage of students commute to campus daily from throughout the metropolitan area. Due to the large number of commuters the campus and surrounding neighborhood has constantly been faced with severe parking problems. Commuters traveling to campus by automobile often spend considerable time searching for parking and at times find it difficult to locate spaces within a few blocks from campus. Other students choose to wait in line as long as 20 to 30 minutes for a parking space to open in the Union parking structure.

The student pass operates like a regular monthly bus pass, except that the pass was good for the entire semester. The university and the transit agreed on a fixed price for...
the student pass, which was coined “UPASS” – university pass. The agreed fixed price initially was about $25/27 per student per semester.

**User Assessment:**

There are three groups that were involved in the adoption of the UPASS: transit agency management, students at the university and university administration. Of the three groups, resistance to change appears greatest among university administrators. This stems from unfamiliarity with public transit and a concern about raising student tuition to pay for the program. Students do not have the option to purchase the UPASS; the cost of the UPASS is automatically added to the semester’s tuition costs. Some university administrators also did appreciate the problems that students had in getting to campus and how it affected their education.

This resistance has been overcome by emphasizing that a pass program can relieve neighborhood parking pressure and increase potential enrollments by reducing the costs of attending the university. Resistance based on concerns about the impact on tuition has been overcome by holding a student referendum. The administration was willing to go along with the idea if the students voted to pay for the program as part of their tuition.

Students, particularly those who regularly commute to campus, feel there are many advantages of a UPASS program. It can save substantial amounts of money, especially if the purchase of a car can be avoided. Non-transit users may oppose the idea of having their tuition raised for a service that they don’t use. Opposition may lessen if they know of other students that do use the pass and benefit from it. Generally similar student fees are used for a variety of purposes such as athletics, student government, health care, etc. all of which have different rates of participation by students. At the same time, non-transit users also benefit from the UPASS. When more students use transit to get to campus, this helps to alleviate some parking congestion, enabling more parking opportunities for those who drive to campus. The UPASS has been marketed as a win-win for both transit and non-transit users.

Mr. Marsho worked with the student government to sell the idea to the whole student body. The student government originally was in favor of the program, but with semesters ending and turnover of the student government leaders, selling the idea to the whole study body took about a couple of years.

The Milwaukee County transit system was an enthusiastic supported of the concept. They saw it as a way to fill up empty seats on buses during off peak times. The program was designed to be revenue neutral with semester fees set to replace money collected at the fare box. Following implementation of the UPASS program, ridership on
transit has increased. Since students tend to commute to school at off-peak times, buses that would have been empty at those times now carry students to UWM.

Technology Assessment:

Relative Benefits:

The UWM campus is the second highest trip generator in Southeast Wisconsin. The advantage of the UPASS is that it decreases the parking congestion on and around campus. The UPASS is another avenue for students to get to UWM. It is an alternative for students and staff. The UPASS is a viable alternative with a number of direct routes to campus. Some of the direct routes require no transferring. It is a viable alternative for many reasons: 1) parking on campus can be expensive, 2) encourages people to use transit, 3) helps to decrease parking congestion, and 4) UPASS provides options for everybody.

A detailed analysis of the UPASS system was conducted following its implementation. Some of the key findings were:

- The UPASS program has increased transit ridership to UWM: MCTS on-board counts and survey results show between a 31% and 45% increase in transit ridership.

- The UPASS program has influenced modal shifts: Students who drive to UWM declined from a rate of 54% prior to UPASS to a rate between 38% to 41% after the implementation of UPASS. Students choosing to ride MCTS increased from 12% prior to UPASS to a rate of 25% to 26% since the implementation of UPASS.

- The UPASS program has increased transit ridership for trips to work, to shopping, and to other locations.

- The UPASS program has attracted new riders to transit and increased ridership levels of regular transit users.
• The UPASS program reduced vehicle trips to the university which resulted in a reduction in emissions, fuel consumption, and resulted in a dollar savings to students.

• Students perceive the parking situation at the university has improved since the implementation of the UPASS program.

• Student support for UPASS was extremely high. 90.4% of students from the Fall 1994 survey and 86.9% from the Spring 1995 survey indicated they either favor or strongly favor the UPASS program.

• Focus group discussions and survey results show that UPASS has the ability to attract and retain students at UWM: Survey results indicate 15% of respondents said the UPASS would have a major impact on their decision to attend UWM in future semesters while 21% indicated the UPASS would have a minor impact.

**Trial process:**

The UPASS program requires a major commitment of resources and needs a one year time span to try. It is difficult to try the concept on a small basis, since its appeal is to have a universal pass for all students.

**Observability:**

Survey analysis and transit ridership counts are needed to determine the impact of the pass. Parties involved with the project were optimistic about the success of the program. They were hopeful that the program was going to work, due to the short supply of parking on and around campus and Milwaukee’s good transit system.

**Complexity:**

The complexity of such a program deals mainly with selling the idea to the students and administration, and agreeing on a price that is affordable and reasonable. With the issue of UPASS pricing, many considerations were taken into account: loss of transit revenue from students who rode the buses before the program and paid full fare, and costs of adding two new routes. Adding two new routes meant costs associated with covering expenses.

**Cost:**

The program was designed to be revenue neutral with costs paid by the student tuition surcharge set to replace lost fare box revenue. The pass initially cost $28 per semester and currently is about $35/semester. This amount also included some funds for service expansion with new routes to campus. The service has been also expanded to include
other transit systems and to included a summer UPASS. The payment for the UPASS
is made directly to the transit office by the university, after collecting from the students.
A regular pass for the Milwaukee Metro costs about $12 weekly. The UPASS is
effective not just for the duration of the semester but for few weeks after the semester
ends. If a student were to purchase a regular pass for one semester, it would cost more
than $200.

Consequences of Failure:

The consequences of failure meant one less major way of commuting to UWM. If the
program had failed, it would have dramatically increased the number of people driving
to school, increase in parking congestion on campus and in surrounding neighborhoods.
The success of the program was critical to UWM. The success, of course, also
depended on the environment of the campus. This program would not work in a non-
urban setting. For example, the UPASS program will not be efficient at a university
located in a small city with large numbers of cheap parking spaces.

The other implementation costs were basically staff time involved with the project. The
main costs of the program are the actual costs of the bus passes the students pay as
part of their segregated fees. The administrative staffing time is part of the general
overhead, and the cost is not passed on to the students. The students’ cost of the
passes goes directly to transit.

Implementation Issues:

The university was mainly concerned about the costs for the students. Many things
went into the price: 1) revenue transit will lose from students who rode before program
and paid full fare, 2) adding two new routes meant additional costs associated with
covering expenses, and 3) coming up with a formula for what the semester charge will
be. To come up with the base price, the university and transit assessed the current
ridership (both had similar ridership estimates), calculated what the new routes will cost
transit, took a percentage off the regular fare, and agreed on a fixed low price.

As for advice to those interesting in implementing a similar program: don’t give up,
persevere, and keep pursuing. For the UWM, selling the idea to the changing student
body government and to the administration was an obstacle. It is very important to sit
down with the student government leaders and get them on board. The student
government leaders could help to convince the administration. It also helps to have a
good relationship with the local transit operator. In implementing the UWM’s UPASS, a
good personal relationship between the university and transit system was very
beneficial. The university also had an agreement with the transit that the fare increase
for the cost of the pass will not be any different from regular fare increases. Both fares
for the regular passes and the UPASS would increase at the same time by similar
percentage.
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For more information also see:

http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CUTS/upassum.htm
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